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Activities of the United Nations Communications Group in 2003

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The United Nations Communications Group, formed in January 2002 at the initiative of the Department of Public Information, has emerged as a strong unifying platform for dealing with common communications challenges facing the United Nations. Its activities in 2003 included an annual meeting in New York, regular meetings at United Nations Headquarters, implementation of communications strategies for the World Summit on the Information Society and the International Year of Freshwater 2003, and several ongoing programmes. By bringing together United Nations communicators for regular brainstorming and strategic planning, the Group has helped to build sustained cooperation among communications offices within the United Nations system, resulting in communications efforts which are more focused, better harmonized and with more clearly defined target audiences. More importantly, it has given the United Nations a tool with which to speak in a common voice on issues of common concern.

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I. Introduction

1. In paragraph 22 of its resolution 58/101 B of 9 December 2003, the General Assembly commended the Department of Public Information on its active and constructive participation in the United Nations Communications Group, in particular its efforts to promote inter-agency coordination in the field of public information. The Assembly, taking note of the efforts being undertaken to develop several initiatives further, encouraged the Department to continue to play a key role in the Group and requested the Secretary-General to report to the Committee on Information at successive sessions on the activities of the Group. The present report, prepared in compliance with that resolution, covers the activities of the Group from March 2003 to February 2004.

2. The United Nations Communications Group, which replaced the Joint United Nations Information Committee, was formed in January 2002 at the initiative of the Department of Public Information as a flexible and substance-driven mechanism for inter-agency coordination in the field of public information and communications. In addition to holding an annual session, the Group has created a number of issue-specific task forces to coordinate the planning and implementation of joint communications strategies on priority issues. It also holds regular meetings at United Nations Headquarters to discuss issues of current interest. Its secretariat is provided by the Department of Public Information.

3. In the past two years, the United Nations Communications Group has emerged as a strong unifying platform for dealing with common communications challenges. The annual meetings, held at rotating locations and attended by members of the Communications Group at the level of head of information, help to outline the strategic direction of the Group and generate a shared sense of purpose. The issue-specific task forces allow the members to focus on key issues and deal with them strategically. Above all, the regular meetings, held under the chairmanship of the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, bring together Communications Group members, including representatives of funds, programmes and specialized agencies and senior officials of the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, for brainstorming on the most pressing issues of common concern. Those meetings allow the Communications Group members to examine current communications challenges, review them from various perspectives and come up with coordinated responses. The United Nations information centres, an integral element of any United Nations communications campaign, are consulted on a regular basis and their inputs are fully shared with all members. The information centres also receive minutes of regular meetings, communications advisories and other documents circulated by the Group. Thus, by integrating the communicators of the United Nations system into a close-knit information network, the United Nations Communications Group provides them with a tool to think and act together.

II. Second annual session

4. The United Nations Communications Group held its second annual session at United Nations Headquarters on 23 and 24 June 2003 under the chairmanship of the Director of Communications, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The session provided a forum for a broad and all-encompassing discussion on information strategies to be adopted and tools to be used for their implementation in

the evolving political and media environment. A total of 32 agencies, programmes and funds of the United Nations, along with the Department of Public Information, the Executive Office of the Secretary-General and other Secretariat offices, took part in the meeting. There was a 20 per cent increase in participation over the 2002 annual meeting.

5. With the crisis in Iraq as a backdrop, the representatives discussed the role and effectiveness of the United Nations and considered options for meaningful and effective public information campaigns at a time of declining credibility for the Organization and growing uncertainty about its future role in the embattled region. The Group identified several elements that it considered vital in formulating any future public information campaigns and noted the following conclusions:

(a) While, outwardly, the Iraq crisis might have dealt the United Nations a blow, the process is not over yet and the United Nations remains the principal multilateral voice;

(b) United Nations communicators should remind the world of the role that Member States play within the framework of the multilateral Organization and the responsibility they bear for actions they take or do not take. While United Nations communicators cannot replace the Governments making decisions, they can influence the climate in which the decisions are made;

(c) At a time of declining support for the Organization, United Nations communicators must speak in a common language and tell the United Nations story in the most effective manner, by working through strategic partnerships and information-sharing. The United Nations Communications Group is a key platform through which that common voice should be developed.

6. In discussing lessons learned from recent public information campaigns, the Group agreed that active use of United Nations field experts, including local and national staff members, should be encouraged. Local staff should be trained and prepared for media outreach. The launch of major United Nations reports should be considered as opportunities for engaging with the media on the issues involved. Statistical information, such as that offered by periodic reports on the Millennium Development Goals, should be used to tell the United Nations story. The Group also agreed that every effort must be made to maximize the use of the Internet as a tool for communications within the system and for channelling information to the outside world.

7. The Group also addressed several cross-cutting issues and reached the following conclusions on their strategic use for reaching common communications goals:

(a) *Millennium Development Goals*. The Group agreed that the Millennium Development Goals continued to enjoy great support among Member States and world political leaders. However, that support needed to be augmented by involving civil society and other segments of society in each country. It recognized the autonomous nature of the Millennium Development Goals Campaign, but underscored the importance of getting the information services of the United Nations involved in the overall campaign. To that end, it was decided that the United Nations Communications Group would set up a task force, led by the Department of Public Information, focusing on communications strategies and their implementation;

(b) *Making better use of United Nations Goodwill Ambassadors*. The Group recognized the enormous value of Goodwill Ambassadors as advocates of United Nations causes and issues. Agreeing that adding new Goodwill Ambassadors without regard to their quality, both in terms of their stature and commitment, could be counterproductive, the Group endorsed a set of guidelines for designating Goodwill Ambassadors. It also agreed to provide due recognition to local celebrities and make better use of them in promoting United Nations issues locally;

(c) *Global surveys as tools for communications*. Global public opinion polls could serve as a way to evaluate the impact of past United Nations communications efforts. That impact — defined as changes in knowledge, attitude and social behaviour — ultimately could only be determined by tracking global public opinion on the United Nations. The Group agreed to look for ways and means to use opinion surveys as a communications tool. It was decided that a task force, headed by UNDP, would be created within the framework of the Group for exploring ways of involving international pollsters and mobilizing resources.

8. In a separate decision, the Group reaffirmed the unique role of the Non-Governmental Liaison Service and urged system-wide recommitment to supporting it. The Group recommended that the members look into concrete ways to enhance their financial support for the Non-Governmental Liaison Service and requested the High-level Committee on Programmes of the Chief Executives Board to take action to strengthen the Service's financial standing.

9. It was decided that the next annual session of the United Nations Communications Group would be held in Nairobi, on 28 and 29 June 2004, under the joint auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), and chaired by the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information.

10. The Evaluation and Communications Research Unit of the Department of Public Information conducted a survey among the participants at the second annual meeting. Overall, the meeting's substantive and organizational merits were praised for providing an ideal forum for the United Nations system's communicators to develop inter-agency contacts and describe shared salient concerns. Over two thirds of respondents of the survey said the meeting was either "well organized" or "very well organized". In terms of networking opportunities, over 80 per cent of the respondents said the meeting was "very useful". Slightly fewer, yet still the majority of participants, indicated the meeting was useful for identifying common problems. However, a majority of comments referred critically to organizational and logistical facets. Suggestions to create more informal networking opportunities outside the conference room were advanced. Lessons learned at the second annual meeting will be taken into account while preparing for the third annual meeting of the Group in 2004.

III. Ongoing activities

11. *Task forces*. During the reporting period, two Communications Group task forces led efforts to implement communications strategies for the World Summit on the Information Society and the International Year of Freshwater:

(a) With the International Telecommunication Union in the lead, the task force on the World Summit on the Information Society worked towards engaging the media as stakeholders of the information society and emphasized the role of freedom of opinion and expression and press freedom. Its strategic objectives included positioning the Summit as a leading global forum for discussion and decisions on the most important issues related to the information society and building wide understanding of the challenges and opportunities posed by the information society and the relevance of information communications technologies for development, particularly for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Specific outreach activities carried out included World TELECOM 2003 and a Youth Forum organized in conjunction with it in Geneva in October 2003. The first phase of the Summit (Geneva, 10-12 December 2003), received extensive coverage. More than 1,200 international journalists, including representatives of about 260 television organizations and 100 still photographers reporting for newspapers and agencies worldwide, were accredited to it. In addition to the print and audio-visual media, the Summit was covered extensively by the Web-based media outlets, including those in the developing countries, such as allAfrica.com, ameinfo.com and ghanaweb.com. The network of United Nations information centres (UNICs) also undertook several special activities to promote the Summit, including a media seminar by UNIC Dakar (in association with the International Telecommunication Union), a youth conference by UNIC Brazzaville and a special web page in four Nordic languages by UNIC Copenhagen. A related activity at the Summit was the World Electronic Media Forum (9-11 December), a parallel event at the World Summit organized by the Department of Public Information, which brought together over 620 people, including international experts, media representatives and civil society groups. In addition to highlighting the contribution of electronic broadcasting to the information society, the Media Forum reiterated that communications technology was not an end in itself, rather it was a vehicle for the provision of information and content. The Global Teaching and Learning Project of the Department of Public Information also organized an event at the Summit in partnership with the European Schoolnet, which brought together information and communication technology school networks from some 45 countries. A series of print, electronic, online and audio-visual materials related to the Summit were issued under the overall guidance of the task force. The task force, which remains in force, will continue to promote the preparations for the second phase of the Summit, to be held in Tunis from 16 to 18 November 2005;

(b) The campaign to promote the observance of the International Year of Freshwater (2003) was coordinated by another task force that was led by the Department of Public Information. Its activities included media outreach in connection with the launch of the first edition of the *World Water Development Report* on 22 March 2003 and the World Water Forum (22-25 March 2003), an international conference on freshwater, held in Kyoto, Japan. The World Water Forum was covered by most major news organizations, including the British Broadcasting Corporation (United Kingdom) and the Cable News Network (United

States). Major international newspapers, including *The New York Times* and *The Financial Times*, published in-depth articles covering water issues and agreements reached at the Forum. An inter-agency op-ed article for World Water Day, signed by six heads of United Nations agencies and programmes, was placed by the United Nations information centres in six countries (Austria, Bangladesh, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy and Portugal);

(c) A task force on the Millennium Development Goals, created following the second annual meeting, also met to identify ways and means to raise the international profile of the campaign for the Millennium Development Goals;

(d) The members of the Communications Group were involved in implementing a rapid-response communications strategy on the United Nations role in the crisis in Iraq. Media guidance and talking points developed for United Nations officials around the world were distributed through the Communications Group secretariat.

12. *Meetings*. During the reporting period, 24 meetings of the Group were held. With guest speakers from both within and outside the United Nations system providing unique insights on issues of current concern, those regular gatherings were the first meeting point for communications experts of the United Nations system to share views and adopt a joint course of action. The minutes of the meetings were distributed to over 300 recipients, including United Nations information centres and communications staff of United Nations system organizations away from United Nations Headquarters, in order to inform them fully of the issues raised.

13. *Third meeting of the Tokyo International Conference on African Development*. The third meeting of the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD III), a regional initiative for Africa which began in 1993 with the joint support of the Government of Japan, the United Nations, the Global Coalition for Africa and UNDP, was held in Tokyo from 29 September to 1 October 2003. Working within the framework of the United Nations Communications Group, UNDP developed a communications strategy aimed at drawing greater international attention to the evolving international partnership in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

14. The main communications objectives for TICAD III included building widespread awareness of and support for the Conference and its objectives, reflected in media coverage and commentary on the Conference; positioning the Conference as the leading international forum at which key issues associated with Africa's development efforts were to be addressed, including support to NEPAD and the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals in Africa; and positioning TICAD III as a successful forum for the presentation of diverse voices in Japan-Africa cooperation and Japan's effort to promote a global partnership for African development. Those coordinated efforts led to a high media profile for the Conference. In addition to major international media outlets, extensive coverage was provided by various African news outlets, including the Pan African News Agency, Africa News and *Jeune Afrique*.

15. *Expo 2005*. Following the decision by the Secretary-General to accept an invitation from the Government of Japan to participate in the 2005 World Exposition (Aichi, Japan, 25 March-25 September 2005), the United Nations Communications

Group recommended in October 2002 that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) be invited to serve as the lead agency for the organization of the joint United Nations pavilion at the event. On the basis of that recommendation, the Secretary-General invited UNESCO to take full responsibility for coordinating the participation of the United Nations system in Expo 2005, including the design, construction and staffing of the United Nations exhibit. Subsequently, on 16 December 2002, the Director-General of UNESCO accepted the invitation and appointed a coordinator for Expo 2005, in a letter to the Secretary-General.

16. At the second annual meeting of the United Nations Communications Group in New York, the members reviewed the progress made on United Nations participation in Expo 2005. The overall theme of Expo 2005 is "Nature's Wisdom". Within the framework of that theme, the focus of the United Nations pavilion will be "Celebrating Diversity", drawing on both cultural and natural diversity and their interdependence. The United Nations and its agencies, funds and programmes are responsible for a wide range of issues, from outer space to the seabed, from the prevention of wars and disease to the promotion of universal human rights. The Organization is also the repository of important legal instruments for the protection of people and their environment. A unique feature of the United Nations pavilion will be the interrelationship of those issues with nature — in the past, currently and in the future — at both local and global levels. Exhibits, programme activities and special events will reflect the theme of diversity in ways which complement the overall goal of promoting understanding and awareness of the importance of diversity in our lives and the need to preserve global common goods.

17. The proposals, prepared by the United Nations Coordinator for Expo 2005, are based on an anticipated budget of $3 million to $5 million. According to the guidelines on United Nations participation in international exhibitions, all expenses for the United Nations pavilion are to be underwritten by the host Government. A draft memorandum of understanding between the Organization and the host Government has been submitted, but has not yet been finalized.

18. It was decided that the Consultative Group for Expo 2005, a working group created within the framework of the Communications Group, will serve as the principal communications platform for those taking part in Expo 2005. The Coordinator will use the Consultative Group to communicate with the members of the Communications Group on the status of negotiations with the host Government, as well as on all Expo 2005-related activities.

19. *Communications Group products*. In order to ensure greater coordination and more effective communications and public information campaigns on United Nations priority issues, the secretariat of the United Nations Communications Group produced an annual calendar of events for 2003 and 2004, listing major United Nations system activities of interest to the world media, including conferences and meetings, launches of major reports and observances. Members of the Group were advised to use the calendar as a tool to plan special events in such a manner as to avoid any overlap or duplication and maximize international media coverage.

20. The secretariat also created a password-protected web site for use by the members of the Communications Group. The web site, which was updated regularly, included reports and background papers prepared in connection with the Group's annual meeting, minutes of regular meetings and the calendar of events. A directory

of the Communications Group members was issued, listing information focal points of the United Nations system. The directory was also posted on the web site of the Communications Group.

IV. Conclusion

21. The creation of the United Nations Communications Group in 2002 was inspired by the vision of the Secretary-General, who had called for creating a new communications culture throughout the United Nations system. Translating this vision into reality called for innovation as well as uniformity. Driven by this challenge, the United Nations Communications Group from the very outset adopted a flexible, but task-oriented approach. By adopting a system-wide approach and establishing well-defined coordinating mechanisms, the Group has helped to build sustained cooperation among communications offices within the United Nations system. As a result, the focus of the Organization's communications efforts has become sharper, activities are better harmonized and target audiences have been more clearly defined. More importantly, it has given the United Nations a tool with which to speak in a common voice.